

## Building Blocks of Faith: Heaven and Eternal Life

II Cor. 4:13-18; John 6:35-40

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I have a photo hanging up in my office, some of you may have seen it. It's called a "surrational image," where two pictures are spliced together to create a picture with a new and deeper meaning. This picture on my wall is of a large gravestone, in the middle of which is a revolving door. It's a daily reminder to me of the transitory and fleeting nature of life. Any of us who have survived a serious illness or been in a car accident knows what I mean. Life is a near-death experience. We revolve through the doors at birth, only to revolve back through them at death to what lies beyond.

So we begin our last sermon in this "Building Blocks of Faith" series at the end, or at the beginning, talking about death and eternal life. This may be one of the most elusive of all the topics we've explored together, simply because of its universality and complexity. One of the downsides of being a human being is the mortality rate: about 100% last time I checked. Death is something we all face. And yet we have no proof, no conclusive evidence of what lies beyond the revolving door. We can point to things that happen in our lives as evidence for God, we can point to the scriptures for evidence for Jesus, but there's nothing that assures us beyond doubt of the promise of eternal life.

I believe it is that simple fact that has fueled the whole "healthy lifestyle" obsession we have. We count our carbs and watch our calories and join exercise clubs for the purpose of being in better health for longer. But when you look at the big picture, there's a significant statement implicit in our motivations: the better shape we are in, the longer we can live and avoid facing death. I think most of us would agree with the statement that we want to live as long as we can. Part of what's at work in our minds is that when death comes, we have no assurance of what comes next. As natural as death is, we treat it as if it's something to avoid at all costs. Woody Allen once said, "I don't want to achieve immortality through my art; I want to achieve it by not dying."

Even when faced with death, we do everything we can to hold on. Realize that everything we do for the dead is really for the living. Preparing of the body, the funeral, the gravestone, memorial gifts: none of these things benefit the person who's died. Rick Warren said, "At death you won't leave home; you'll go home." The dead person is already home, and doesn't need anything else. The rituals of death and burial are for those of us left behind, to ease the parting, to help us make sense of the loss and work through our grief. We want the deceased to still be with us in some way, because we don't know for sure what's on the other side of the revolving door.

Because death takes the ones we love, causes us so much pain, and threatens our own existence, we see it as our enemy, something to be fought against, something to run from. And yet, the Bible tells us that God has conquered every enemy, even death, so that death is no longer something to be feared. Jonathan Swift said, "It is impossible that anything so natural, so necessary, and so universal as death should ever have been designed by God as an evil to humans." Do you think God would so lovingly and caringly create us only so that we could have our lives cruelly snatched from us by death? Would God start a life only so death could end it? God's love for us gives us some comfort in the face of the unanswered questions about death.

Another source of information about what's to come after this life is in the Bible. In the scriptures we find multiple viewpoints of eternal life. Many Jewish people in the OT thought that at death, a human being went to live eternally in Sheol, a shadowy underworld. Then, some Jewish thinkers developed the idea of resurrection from the dead. They believed that on a future day, God will end the present evil age of history in a dramatic apocalypse and begin a new age free of sin and characterized by justice and peace. A third viewpoint adopted by some people was the Greek understanding that a human being is made up of a material body and a nonmaterial soul, and at death the two are separated, and the person continued on as a disembodied spirit. Finally, some of the Jewish groups, like the Sadducees, did not believe in an afterlife.

Jesus' teachings brought a revolutionary understanding to the idea of the afterlife. Instead of people being sentenced to Sheol, instead of waiting in some kind of Purgatory for the apocalypse, instead of existing as disembodied spirits, Jesus gives us a glimpse of an all-together different eternity: a bodily resurrection followed by eternal life with God in Heaven.

That's a concept that is so far beyond our understanding that we struggle to even make sense of it. I once asked my junior high youth group at another church to list some of the questions they would like to ask God. And every single one of them had a question relating to Heaven: How can I get to Heaven? What will I do when I'm in Heaven? Will I see my loved ones in Heaven? Are there shopping malls in Heaven? Remember, this was a junior high group.

And yet, all the questions about Heaven are unanswerable here on earth except for one. If I were to ask you, "Are you going to Heaven?" what would you say? Most of us would say something like, "Gee, I hope so," or "If I'm good enough" or "I don't know, I haven't led a perfect life." But Jesus says in John, "For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes shall have eternal life." Paul says that for believers, our citizenship is in Heaven. How do you get to Heaven? Through faith. All who believe shall have eternal life.

Other than the question of how we get there, the capacity of our brains cannot begin to understand the questions about Heaven. Comprehending the wonders of heaven is like trying to explain the Internet to an ant. We don't have the vocabulary or the mental faculties to envision the glories of what awaits us.

That is why we are so fearful of death and skeptical about Jesus' message. We don't know for sure, and we humans like to know for sure. But Paul tells us that knowing for sure has nothing to do with faith: "We fix our eyes not on what is seen, but what is unseen. For what is seen is temporal, but what is unseen is eternal." Therein lies the great paradox of faith: fix your eyes on what is unseen. Put your trust in what cannot be proven. Believe in what you cannot know for sure.

Still, it's fun to speculate, isn't it? What will Heaven be like? Streets paved with gold? Angels playing harps? Spending eternity doing what we love best? I was disappointed to read what John Ortberg wrote. He said there will be no golf in Heaven. The Bible says that in Heaven there will be no lying, no cheating, and no wailing and gnashing of teeth. So how could there be golf?

One of the questions that comes up a lot is, "What am I going to do with all that time? Eternity seems so long!" This was captured perfectly by Gary Larson in one of his

Far Side Cartoons. It shows a guy with angel wings and a bored expression sitting on cloud, thinking, "Wish I'd brought a magazine."

That points out one of the inherent flaws in our speculation about Heaven and eternal life. We can only think about them in terms we understand. So we tend to think about eternal life in spatial terms (up there somewhere on a cloud) or in chronological terms (lasting from our death until eternity).

And yet, eternal life is neither spatial nor chronological. Barb Osicka made a great point in Bible Study on Tuesday that while we humans define things in terms of chronological time, God is timeless. God is not bound by the restrictions of past, present, and future. All three of those exist at once in God. So eternal life spent with God cannot be measured in years or centuries or millennia. Eternal life is not so much an amount of time as it is a state of being, a timeless existence fully connected with God.

Let me play this thought out a bit more with a quote from German theologian Ludwig Wittenstein. He said, "Death is not an event in life; we do not live to experience death. If we take eternity to mean not infinite temporal duration but timelessness, then eternal life belongs to those who live in the present."

He is saying that if we believe eternity with God is not defined by chronological time, then we are living our eternal lives right now. We tend to think of eternal life with God as something we inherit when we get to Heaven, like St. Peter stamps our hand at the Pearly Gates, giving us access to our eternal life. But if eternal life is truly eternal, meaning not bound by our human concepts of time, then we are living our eternal life with God as we speak.

This has implications not only for when we die, but how we live. A writer once said that death is not the tragedy. The tragedy is what we let die in us while we live. We have come through the revolving door onto this earth for a purpose, and that purpose is not to die. That purpose is to live, to live a life that fully embraces our creation as God's child, a life that honors God's love for us and for every person, a life that seeks to make God's love known here on earth.

And when we return through that revolving door, we can trust that what awaits us is greater than anything we could ever imagine here on earth. May your life be strengthened by the knowledge that our Savior Jesus Christ has conquered death, so that we no longer need to live in fear, but live with the confidence that we will never, ever be separated from the love of God.